

Preface

This book arose out of two stimuli. One was the invitation from the editors of the Hoover Institution Press's Studies of Nationalities to prepare a manuscript on the Czechs to submit to their outstanding series for consideration. The other was my frustration, simmering for more than two decades, at the lack of a recent, single-volume general history of the Czechs to use in my own teaching and to recommend to others interested in this people and their country, subjects that are very near and dear to me. Thus I set about attempting to meet both goals, and this book is the result of that effort. It presents an introduction to the major themes and contours of Czech history intended for any interested reader, and if about half the work is devoted to the twentieth century, earlier periods are not entirely ignored. It is a work of synthesis and as such owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to a host of scholars, living and long dead, who have informed my understanding of Czech history beyond my own research. It would be impossible to name them all, but careful readers will find their suspicions confirmed in the notes.

It may seem outdated to produce a history of a people and their land in an age when globalization is an omnipresent reality, and when academic historians are looking for ways to transcend the nation-state

as an organizing structure for historical narrative. Nevertheless, even as they enter the European Union, the Czechs and the Czech Republic will not simply disappear. Their past—what they remember, what they choose to forget, and how they choose to remember and forget it—will continue to shape who and what they are. I hope that this book will serve as a starting point for anyone setting out to learn more about that past, with all its lights and shadows. If so, it will repay the debt I owe to R. W. Seton-Watson and S. Harrison Thomson, whose surveys introduced me to Czech history.

Like every other author writing about this region of Europe, I have had to decide what to do about place names and some personal names. In the text, I normally give the present-day Czech name of towns and cities first, followed by the German equivalent at first mention. I assume that most readers opening this book will be more likely to know or find the names in use today, and it seems easier to explain that Liberec was once known as Reichenberg to most of its inhabitants than to call it Reichenberg/Liberec throughout the text. Where an English form has become universally known, I use it instead of a Czech or German form (Prague, not Praha, Vienna, not Wien). Similarly, I write Francis Joseph, not Franz Joseph. In other cases, I choose what seems logical to me, for example František Palacký, but Franz Kafka. Dates following a ruler's name are the dates of his or her reign, not life.

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